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ABSTRACT

This paper studies trends in education and changes in political thinking that have accompanied rural to urban migration and the emergence of industrial society since the turn of the century. Nowhere is this shift reflected more clearly than in the centralization and consolidation of public schools. Because education is constitutionally a state function, it is at this level that most political action takes place which affects rural schools. There are few examples of action at the local level that influence or resist outside (centralized) control. The development of People United for Rural Education (PURE), a Nebraska organization to monitor and influence legislation, is one such example. Similar groups in other states are described. Few rural champions have existed at the federal level in recent years. Conventional wisdom assumes that rural economic problems are taken care of through farm policy. Examples of federal legislation that discriminate against rural areas are cited. Such discrimination is not likely to get better. States with large rural populations are estimated to lose representation in the House of Representatives, a trend that is expected to continue after 1990. Given statistical documentation and examples of policy discrimination, deliberations in Congress have resulted in a legislative proposal for a "Rural Rights Act" and rural issues have found their way on the agenda of other national legislative conferences. This paper concludes with the hope that such renewed interest in rural problems will translate into a growing sensitivity to those problems by people involved in the legislative process. (TES)

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AERA/SIG Rural Education Symposium

March 29, 1989

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Introduction

Politics, according to Webster, is the art or science of government, ...concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policy. Policymaking, whether at the local, state, or federal level, is not an organized, logical exercise where issues are decided solely on the basis of merit. It is a political process where programs are created and funding is allocated through leadership, persuasion, and, at its best, by consensus. The bottom line, however, of the political process is the will of the majority. In an ideal world, what is good for the majority would be good for all. In the real world, this is often not the case. Far too often, the needs of those not in power get neglected.

Politics: The Shift From Rural To Urban

The politics of rural America has experienced major shifts since the turn of the century. Rural issues have lost prominence for many reasons, perhaps the most important being the shift of population from rural to urban. In 1900, 60% of the country's residents were rural. Sixty years later only one fourth of the population was rural. With this shift in population came reapportionment of legislative bodies at both the state and federal level reducing or eliminating the rural majority which once looked out for and championed rural interests. Secondly, the rise of special interest groups and other issue-specific coalitions has divided constituencies across geographical lines, making rural distinctions less relevant in the political arena. As an example, the elderly have amassed tremendous visibility and political clout in recent years, and Congress has responded generously to their interests. However, the unique concerns of the rural elderly are secondary to the concerns of

the coalition at large. (Jahr, 1988) Finally, rural diversity and the political independence of rural people tends to negate the necessary coalition building needed for successful political action.

The population shift from rural to urban was due to the rapid mechanization and industrialization of the nation's economy. Fewer people were needed to work the nation's farms; more were needed to meet the manpower needs of the factories. Politicians and the political process struggled to adjust the workings of government to meet the demands of this emerging industrialized society. Nowhere is this shift in political thinking reflected clearer than in the centralization and consolidation of the public schools. The critical problems for an emerging education system appeared in the cities, and it was here that the shape of American schooling evolved. With the modus operandi and standards of excellence established in the cities, rural schools were thought to be inferior. Convinced by advocates of scientific management that within the techniques of industrialization - bigger is better, specialization, proper supervision - lies the secret for efficiency and effectiveness in education, reformers molded rural education into a likeness of urban education. Politicians at the state level, persuaded by the professional leadership, which for the most part were urban educators, embarked on a policy of school consolidation. (Tyack, 1974) The 200,000+ one-room schools were first merged into town schools. The small town schools were subsequently consolidated into larger multi-community school districts. The number of school districts was correspondingly reduced from approximately 128,000 in 1930 to fewer than 16,000 in 1989.

Similar reductions in service delivery for rural areas and small towns can be documented in fields such as health and welfare. In recent years with federal deregulation, public transportation and electronic communications have been affected as well. Bus service has been reduced or no longer exists in many rural communities. Air travel, once heavily subsidized, has also experienced cutbacks

with many rural areas no longer being served. Where it does exist, air fares are inordinately high. Travel within a state or region of the country is often higher than if one were to go from coast-to-coast or overseas.

Reactions at the Local, State and Federal Level

As the pendulum of political power has shifted from rural to urban, rural interests have reacted, for the most part taking rearguard action. Some examples, again from the field of education, follow.

Local - There are few opportunities to take action at the local level to influence or resist the political forces which are perceived to erode local control. For the most part, a single community is at the mercy of state level politics. There are, however, a couple of examples worth noting. Alan Peshkin in his book **The Imperfect Union: School Consolidation and Community Conflict** (1982) documents a school consolidation in which one of the communities involved undertakes an extended struggle to keep its school. Soon after the district consolidation had been accomplished, the Kilmer Concerned Citizens group was formed for the purpose of persuading the newly elected board that its elementary school should not be closed. In spite of various attempts at legal action the board voted to close the school. In the succeeding months and years the community turned to political action. Over time they were able to elect a majority of board members which agreed with their point of view, the Kilmer school decision was reverse and the school reopened.

A more recent example of local political action can be found in rural Nebraska. Nebraska, the last real holdout to school consolidation, still has in excess of 600 Class I elementary districts. Approximately half of those districts are one or two teacher schools enrolling fewer than 30 students. Efforts to merge these districts into K-12 units continues to meet with great resistance. Recent legislation provides for districts to contract their students to neighboring districts if they chose to no longer operate a school. This arrangement has a three year time-limit at which point the contracting district is dissolved and merged with

the K-12 system.

Two years ago, the board of a small district in Hall County (Grand Island is the county seat) took the necessary action to contract its students to a neighboring school. As the three year limit drew near the community, knowing that it was soon to lose its school for good, initiated a recall election of the local school board which had made the decision to contract its students. The recall election was successful, a new board was elected which was sympathetic to reversing the decision and re-opened the school for the community's 12 elementary school children. The community is putting forth significant financial resources to make their school "the best small rural school in the state."

State - Because education is constitutionally a state function, it is at this level that most of the political action takes place which affects rural schools. The most frequent political battles focus on school finance and school organization. As the balance of political power continues to shift from rural to urban, rural school interests have of necessity had to organize to protect their interests.

One of the first such groups to organize was People United for Rural Education, (PURE). In January 1977, a bill was introduced in the Iowa legislature to mandate the reorganization of districts with fewer than 300 pupils K-12. This was to be the first step in a Department of Public Instruction's plan to consolidate Iowa's schools into districts with 1,000 or more students, in keeping with the recommendations of the Iowa-based Great Plains School Organization Study, which concluded that the 1,000-pupil district was the smallest efficient and adequate educational unit. A group composed largely of farm women, concerned about the impact the passage of such a bill would have on their local communities, began organizing to defeat the legislation. More than 1000 small-school supporters gathered at the legislative hearings to oppose legislated consolidation. As the debate wore on, these concerned parents realized that "The administrators are

organized; the teachers are organized; the Department of Public Instruction is organized. Who's speaking for the children?" The next day letters were sent out for an organizational meeting. By the end of the meeting People United for Rural Education had been formed. PURE, a grass-roots organization, formed for the purpose of lobbying for the interests of small rural schools, was originally made up primarily of non-educators. Later, sensitive to the growing criticism that PURE was a one-issue anticonsolidation organization, the group expanded its purpose to serve as a rallying point for small-school improvement concepts and broadened its membership to include educators. (Dunn, 1982)

PURE, which has been at its strongest when the rural schools of the state were under siege, grew to over 3,000 members. A primary focus over the years has been to monitor and attempt to influence the legislative process as bills impacting rural schools are introduced. Opposing forced consolidation has continued to be a major issue along with increased funding for small rural schools. Finance efforts have included encouraging more flexibility in local tax limitations and supporting financial assistance for inter-district sharing of teachers and students. In recent years, as legislative tactics have shifted from forced consolidation to increasing quality standards, enthusiasm for PURE has waned. In fact, questions have been raised as to whether the organization has out-lived its usefulness. PURE's lobbyist was present during recent hearings on the new school finance legislation where proposals for weighted funding for small schools and financial incentives for sharing were discussed. In spite of the apparent urban bias in the discussion, there was little opposition expressed from the rural interests. At this writing, the final bill has not been passed. However, at best it appears that rural schools will be fortunate not to lose ground in the new funding formula.

In other states, the protection of rural school interests has rested more heavily on professional educators. The North Dakota Small Organized Schools (NDSOS) is a state-wide organization representing over 100 of the state's 285 school

districts. Its brochure outlining its legislative program for 1989 states -

> "The North Dakota Small Organized Schools exists for the purposes of obtaining legislation for the benefit of the association; providing quality educational opportunities for all children of North Dakota; opposing further North Dakota unified school district consolidation without the approval of the patrons involved; pursuing the quality of excellence in education; giving identity, voice, and exposure to the particular quality of rural schools; and enhancing the quality of life unique in the rural community"

It goes on to list its legislative priorities which include items related to school finance, declining enrollment, funding for transportation, additional financial support for technology/distance learning, incentive payments for district cooperation and shared services, continued local control in determining teacher salaries and school calendars, and more equitable financing of special education costs. In order to further this legislative agenda, NDSOS has employed a Bismarck based lawyer as its executive secretary. During the legislative session, which meets every two years, a weekly newsletter is provided the membership which tracks bills as they are introduced, identifies those that are consistent with or opposed to the organizations priorities and exhorts the membership to make the phone calls and visits needed to further the NDSOS agenda.

In Kansas, the rural school organization, Schools for Quality Education, (SQE) has in recent years taken a more pro-active role for small schools. In addition to their lobbying activities, they have undertaken a number of studies designed to document the quality of programs offered by rural schools. The latest such effort, **A Study of the Perceived Effectiveness of Kansas Small Schools**, was jointly sponsored by SQE and the Center for Rural Education and Small Schools of the College of Education, Kansas State University. The Texas Community Schools Association, the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association, the Colorado Association for Rural Education are other examples of rural education special interest groups. The Colorado organization, one of the more recent to be formed, organized a rural education forum in the state capitol during the legislative session in an attempt to become more visible in the political process.

Federal - Few rural champions have existed at the federal level in recent years. Conventional wisdom assumes that rural economic problems are taken care of through farm policy. Assistance to education has largely been through categorical programs, the long standing example being vocational agriculture which started with the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917. Programs designed to address the needs of special populations, e.g. special education, low income (Chapter I), are based on per-capita funding. Rural districts often do not have sufficient numbers to make applying for the funds worth while. Furthermore, in attempts to cut down on administrative costs, there is a tendency to eliminate the eligibility of some districts altogether. A recent ruling to curb the regulatory burden of the Transition Program for Refugee Children eliminates districts which have fewer than 20 eligible students. The money saved will hike the per-pupil spending in eligible districts by 10%. Thus, small districts of two or three hundred students that have a dozen or even a half a dozen such children must take on a financial burden that a districts of that size are ill prepared to meet.

The Job Training Partnership Act of 1982 is another example of implicit federal discrimination against rural areas. Two-thirds of the funding was allocated according to unemployment figures of little relevance to the rural employment picture. (Congress of the United States, 1985) Because of under-reporting of unemployment and the way the formula was designed, rural areas were denied over $100 million in funding from 1983 through 1985, according to a preliminary analysis by the General Accounting Office. (Jahr, 1988)

Such discrimination against rural America is not likely to get better, particularly if rule changes are dependent on political action. Dale Jahr, in his paper **The Rural Political Economy: Change and Challenge** quoted earlier, (1988) under took a detail analysis of the make-up of both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. In 1985, rural districts from which House members are elected were at a 2 to 1 disadvantage. The 1990 apportionment will exacerbate this imbalance.

States with large rural populations such as West Virginia, Kansas, Iowa, Ohio, Illinois, are estimated to lose representation. This trend, Jahr says, is projected to continue after 1990 with 13 to 19 additional seats reapportioned to states with high population growth. Adding to this dreary projection is the fact that a state need not lose a seat in order to lose a "rural seat". Population shifts within states can cause district boundaries to change. Rural residents comprise about 24 percent of the U.S. population. Rural districts number 88, or 20 percent indicating that geographic representation is not uniform. Finally, in terms of seniority and leadership, rural Representatives lag behind their urban colleagues, occupying fewer than 17 percent of key leadership positions. If the House reflected the rural population uniformly, about 104 seats would serve rural districts, and about 36 rural Representatives would control chairs instead of the current 25. (Jahr, 1988)

The Senate side, because of the equal representation from each state, presents a bit more positive picture, although not much. Fifteen of the 50 states have a majority of their populations residing in nonmetropolitan areas. The states are Maine, Vermont, West Virginia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Arkansas, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Alaska. This nucleus, according to Jahr, represents a potentially stronger voice for rural interests than exists in the House. He ends his analysis of the Senate side by saying "Rural interests are represented by a greater proportion due to the design of the Senate. In addition, since all Senators have constituents that meet a rural definition, there is just cause for their awareness of and appreciation for important rural concerns. Justification, though, is not reason enough for political prominence. Senators must see a political relevance before they advance rural issues". (Jahr, 1988)

One recent example of this political relevance is the Rural Initiative legislation passed by congress during the last two sessions. Riding on the concern created by the rural economic crises related to agriculture and energy production,

the Regional Educational Laboratories proposed legislation for a special $4 million dollar appropriation to address the growing array of problems faced by rural schools. With the leadership of Senators from two states, North Dakota and Wisconsin, who chaired key committees, and, with support on the House side from congressmen from predominantly rural districts, the legislation moved successfully through both houses. A shaky coalition of professional organizations, which either tacitly supported, or did not openly oppose the legislation, created the necessary climate to pass the legislation.

While on the surface this coup appeared to be a break-through for rural interests and more specifically rural education, on closer examination may actually be little more than a blip on the political horizon. The key senator from North Dakota, only the third person to hold this Senate seat in the history of the state and one who succeeded his father in this position, is now up in years. His replacement will not immediately move into the senior leadership positions even if the commitment to rural issues is present. For this particular piece of legislation, the critical factors were in perfect alignment. Given the earlier analysis of Congress, the odds of having the necessary factors converge again may not be great.

Toward a Rural Rights Movement

The statistics on personal income, poverty rates, unemployment and underemployment, level of education, and incidence of substandard housing all show rural America to be worse off than urban America. There is a growing case for considering rural America to be disadvantaged. And, as discussed earlier, there are examples of where public policy discriminates against rural sections of the country. Given this realization, the deliberations of the Joint Economic Committee's **Economic Evolution of Rural America** resulted in a legislative proposal by the committee staff for a "Rural Rights Act". The preamble to this "rural bill of rights" stated "...(t)hat integral and essential to the securing and maintaining

of these rights is adequate access by all the people to public services and to the means of commerce, communication, education and health care, regardless of race, sex, age, creed, national origin -- or geographic residence."

This resolution followed the preamble:

> WHEREAS, rural America is the origin and foundation of America's economic and social strength;
>
> WHEREAS, the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights were conceived and implemented for all Americans; and
>
> WHEREAS, the rural and agricultural economy is undergoing a fundamental and dramatic socioeconomic transition of historical proportion;
>
> THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES renew, strengthen and guarantee the rights of all Americans by protecting the rights of rural Americans;
>
> Preserve the access of rural citizens to the same basic, minimum services that are provided to urban citizens, among those being health care, education and vocational training, community services for all citizens, social services for the elderly and disadvantaged, transportation, government services to individuals and businesses, postal services, financial and commercial services, energy resources, telecommunications, and technological advances of all kinds; and
>
> Ensure the prosperity of all Americans by retaining and fostering the American spirit of freedom and free enterprise, goodwill, ambition, civic duty and social responsibility, as are cherished, revered and practiced by rural Americans.

Four titles were included in the draft. The first would prohibit discrimination against rural residents; the second required "rural impact statements" on all Federal proposals, regulations and policies to ascertain how rural areas would be affected before any action would be implemented; the third title would create a rural rights commission; and the fourth would revamp the Department of Agriculture to strengthen and expand its role in all areas of rural society. (Congress of the United States, 1985)

This growing concern that rural interests are not being sufficiently attended to through the political process is reflected more recently in actions at the state level. Rural has found its way on the agenda of both the National Governors' Association (NGA) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). NGA

commissioned a series of 12 background papers including one on **Rural Development: The Role of the Public Schools**. (Nachtigal & Hobbs, 1988) These papers and the recommendations have been summarized in the report of the Task Force on Rural Development, **New Alliances for Rural America**. (National Governors' Association, 1988) NCSL, as a part of their new school finance research agenda, commissioned a paper **Restructuring Rural Schools.** (Nachtigal & Haas, 1988) One can only hope that this renewed interest in the problems of rural America will translate into a growing sensitivity to those problems by those involved in the legislative process.

Summary

This century has seen the political pendulum swing from rural to urban. Imbedded in this shift is an urban bias in public policy that has resulted in a growing level of discrimination against rural America. The reality of political self interest is such that the usual legislative processes are unlikely to respond to rural needs without concerted effort to frame these needs in terms of a bill of rights for rural Americans. It is a time for coalition building on the part of all rural interests if such a bill of rights is to become important to the nations agenda.

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